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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the impact of the Baby Boomer generation on public libraries. The paper has five main objectives: (1) to provide a statistical and demographic profile of the Baby Boomers at the local, state, and national levels within Australia; (2) to provide characteristics of the Baby Boomer generation; (3) to present comparative results and outcomes of a library survey within the Shire of Swan (Australia) Public Library Service where the Baby Boomers were statistically targeted, including demographics, self service options, purpose for using the libraries, prioritization of future services/needs, personal computer and Internet access, value to customers of services and resources, and leisure interests; (4) to address the issue of mythical or real impact of this generation on public libraries; and (5) to address the issue of theoretical documentation about the Baby Boomers versus practical evidence. (MES)

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The baby boomer generation - impact on public libraries:theoretical and practical evidence

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Paper

Introduction

Along with the other nations, Australia will experience one of the greatest demographic movements and cultural shifts in history with the Baby Boomer generation. This generation has long commanded the attention of demographers, politicians, marketers and social scientists. En masse the generation has had a significant impact on the national psyche, politics and the social fabric of all nations. The Boomer generation transformed and literally disrupted the social norms of the established society of the day. In numbers they are vast, however the sheer numbers are not entirely the issue.

This paper forms part of preliminary research conducted for a PhD through Charles Sturt University, New South Wales, Australia on the Baby Boomers and public libraries. It may be noted that this is not a definitive document on the Baby Boomers - extensive further research and investigation will be conducted to complete the thesis on this topic.

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Objectives

Is it a reality or a myth that this generation will impact on public libraries? Is what has been written and stated about the Baby Boomers reflect in the practical evidence? These questions will be addressed in this working paper which is an abridged version of a paper presented at the National Public Libraries Conference in Perth, Western Australia 1999. Publication details are listed in the References at the conclusion of the paper.

The paper has five main objectives:

- provide a statistical and demographic profile of the Baby Boomers at the local, state and national levels within Australia;
- provide characteristics of the Baby Boomer generation;
- present comparative results and outcomes of a library survey within the Shire of Swan Public Library Service where the Baby Boomers were statistically targeted;
- address the issue of mythical or real impact of this generation on Public Libraries;
- address the issue of theoretical documentation about the Baby Boomers versus practical evidence.

Demographic Analysis - Baby Boomer statistical profile

This analysis has involved an examination and assessment of expanded thematic profiles by the Australian Bureau of Statistics of the Boomers in Australia, Western Australia and the Shire of Swan. All statistics have been based on the 1996 Australian census and the Baby Boomer period has been determined as being from 1946-1961.

The table listed below highlights some comparative demographic details about the Baby Boomers in Australia, Western Australia and the Shire of Swan.

Table 1: Demographic Analysis

	Australia	Western Australia	Shire of Swan
	NUMBER OF BABY BOOMERS		
Total Number of Baby Boomers	4,233,310	418,356	16,235
Number of Baby Boomers %	23.65%	24.23%	24%
	PLACE OF BIRTH		
Australian Born	67%	59%	54%
Overseas Born	33%	41%	46%
	PROFICIENCY IN ENGLISH		
Speaks only English	82%	86%	81%
Speaks another Language & English Well/Very Well	13%	10%	14%
Speaks another Language & English not at all well	2.5%	1.5%	2.5%

	EMPLOYMENT		
In Labour Force	78%	79%	78%
Employed	73%	75%	72%
Unemployed	11%	9%	10%
Not in Labour Force	18%	18%	24%
Employed as Managers, Administrators, Assoc Professionals	24%	25%	20.9%
Employed as Clericals, Tradespersons, Service Workers, Production, Sales & Labourers	54%	54.5%	63.7%
Employed as Professionals	20%	18.5%	12.8%
	INCOME LEVELS		
Weekly income $200-$599	22%	19.8%	23.4%
Weekly income $600-$999	25.8%	25.4%	30.9%
Weekly income $1000-$1,999	27.7%	29%	26.4%
Weekly income $2000	7.2%	7.2%	3%
Partial income	13.2%	14.6%	12.5%
	EDUCATION LEVELS		
Bachelor/Postgrad Dip/Higher Degree	15%	13%	8%
Undergrad Diploma/Associate Diploma	8%	8%	7%

Educational statistics have been based on unpublished tables of the 1996 Census of Population and Housing prepared by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

From Table 1 it is evident that there are a great number of Baby Boomers whether at the national, state or local levels and many have been born overseas. Proficiency of the English language is high and almost half are employed in professional capacities and the other half in trades and other employment.

Educational levels are high and after a further breakdown of the statistics it became evident that there was little difference between the number of 'leading' edge Boomers (those born between 1946-1955) in Australia and Western Australia with higher educational levels than those of the 'trailing' edge group (those born between 1956-1961).

Of the 'leading' edge Baby Boomers in Australia 8.4% had attained a Higher degree, Postgraduate diploma or Bachelor degree and 4.8% either an Undergraduate diploma or Associate diploma. By comparison 6.3% of the 'trailing' edge Boomers had achieved either a Higher degree, Postgraduate diploma or Bachelor degree and 3.2% an Undergraduate or an Associate diploma. In Western Australia 7.6% of the 'leading' edge

Boomers had achieved higher degrees, with 5% having an Undergraduate or Associate diploma. For the 'trailing' edge Boomers 5.6% had achieved a Higher degree, Postgraduate diploma or Bachelor degree and 3.3% an Undergraduate or an Associate diploma. In the Shire of Swan the results for the 'leading' edge Boomers highlighted that 4.5% had achieved Higher degrees and 3.9% an Undergraduate and Associate diploma. As for the 'trailing' edge Boomers 3.4% had achieved Higher degrees and 3.1% an Undergraduate or Associate diploma.

A comparative analysis was undertaken of the overall tertiary education levels in Western Australia for the years 1938 and 1948.This information was based on statistics from the relevant Statistical Registers of Western Australia. Students who were born in 1920 would have entered university in 1938 when only 727 persons were enrolled in degree courses out of a population of 460,161. This equated to 0.15% of the population. In 1948 when those born in the 1930's would have been attending higher education institutions only 1,950 persons of a population of 522,330 were enrolled in degree courses (0.37%). Within the same periods of time only 108 degrees were conferred in 1938 and 176 in 1948. Despite the low higher educational levels within these years, some of this age group could however have obtained Higher degrees later in life.

In general these statistical results emphasise the fact that there are a greater number of those born between 1946 -1961 with higher educational levels than those of previous generations.

Baby Boomer Generation - Theoretical Evidence

In Australia, Hugh Mackay (1997) has identified three generations competing for current services and demanding an understanding of their needs. These three generations are those born in the 1920's often referred to as the 'silent' or 'lucky' generation, the Baby Boomers born between 1946-1961 and the Baby Busters/ Generation X or Dot.com generation, the children of the Boomers. In essence these are three different societies.

The Baby Boomer generation has often been referred to the as the 'breakthrough', 'me' and 'stress' generation with a host of other terms used by astute marketers referring to the ageing segment of this generation as grey power and ABENS (Asset Backed Empty Nesters). In America there are about 76 million Boomers, which represents 29% of the population. In Australia, there are over four million Boomers representing 24% of the population.

The immediate questions that do arise are - What has influenced this generation; what are the characteristics of the generation and is it a homogenous group of individuals or are there major differences? Born after the Second World War, the *"pig in the demographer's python"* the Boomers are now in their *"Boom"* period. Baby Boomers are individuals who grew up in the second half of the 1940's, the 1950's and the very early 1960's. The period is often recorded as between 1946-1961. Some demographers particularly in the US refer to the period between 1946 -1964. For the purposes of this paper the period 1946 - 1961 has been selected. The term 'post-war baby boom' refers to the increase in births when Australian servicemen returned home from World War II. The birth rate rose to record levels, creating the generation that came to be known as the Baby Boomers.

The Baby Boomers are almost notorious as being the first generation not

only to challenge the mores of the past, but also to have actually fundamentally changed and transformed them. Rock music, drugs and free love may all be part of today's generation, but it was the Boomers who lead the way and made the new the norm. As a group in general terms, market research has shown that the Boomers are demanding and do expect value for money, quality products and convenience. Time is of the essence for this consumer group.

They strive to remain youthful and mentally young and view retirement as an active period of their life. Their interest in health , fitness, looking young and attractive and longevity is quite phenomenal. There are in fact many parallels with the teenage market.

They can expect to live longer due to medical advances however stress and burnout could impact on this expectation of longevity. They are well educated, thirsty for information interested in travel and will want to stay involved in the political processes. In addition they are optimistic, forward thinking and undoubtedly redefine old age. This is the Great Expectations generation, the pioneers of the new aged. Indeed their needs, interests and values will determine both social and fiscal policy and shape the political agenda well into the 21st Century.

One of the most valuable contributions to an understanding of the Baby Boomers from an Australian perspective is the work of social psychologist Hugh Mackay. His publication 'Generations: Baby Boomers, their parents and their children' is the outcome of many years of research and the work focuses on the characteristics of the Baby Boomer group in particular the Leading Edge group (born 1946-1955) in the Australian context. Mackay refers to the Baby Boomers ('Leading' edge) as the 'Stress' Generation, their parents the 'Lucky' Generation and their children the 'Options' Generation.

In their quest for the personal happiness that this generation had been led to expect due to the timing of their birth, Mackay is reported to have stated, as summarised by TeamWorks Australia in their publication *"Baby Boomer Research Top Up"* that the Boomers have:

- become the most divorced generation;
- created the two-income household as the cultural norm;
- as a result of the above, redefined the dynamics of family life to include single parent families, re-marriage and joining families, and delaying having children;
- lead the gender revolution; and
- grown up with the ideal of egalitarianism. (TeamWorks Australia 1998, p3)

As for information the Boomers consume it "as voraciously as they have previously consumed Thai food, experiential holidays, sexual partners and cars". (Mackay 1997, p118).

Both Mackay and Carol Davis another Australian leader in research relating to the financial status of the Baby Boomers, identify two distinct groups among the Baby Boomers as the 'leading' edge and the 'trailing' edge. Davis has described the former group as those who took advantage of the boom after the Second World War, who own their own homes and have few debts. Their children have either left, or are progressively leaving home. If a two-income family, they have a higher disposable income than their young counterparts and as a group are powerful both economically and

politically. The 'trailing' edge boomers have been described as not having the same opportunities as their senior counterparts and as a result of a depressed economy particularly after the 1987 stock market crash have experienced financial difficulties. They do not own their own home outright and are still educating their children. (TeamWorks Australia 1998, p5)

TeamWorks Australia identifies the work of Warner who cites a study conducted by the University of Michigan, which also indicated that the two halves of the Baby Boomer generation are quite different, particularly in their saving and spending patterns. This study concluded that the more senior Baby Boomers have become quite careful and thrifty as they approach retirement. Their junior counterparts have adopted those spending habits associated with the Boomers directly after the Second World War.

Warner in the same article refers to additional work by The Strategy Group which recommends that marketers should consider their target markets in terms of 'cohort groupings' rather than broad age categories that cross generations. This concept relies on common behavioural trends in other words, people born around the same time (a 'cohort') will share many similar and long lasting attitudes about life, formed in youth and adulthood. (TeamWorks Australia 1998, p5)

The AMR: Quantum Harris and advertising agency McCann - Ericson surveyed 700 Baby Boomers, followed by 60 in -depth interviews and compared their views and outlook with 1300 older and younger "non-Boomers". The outcome of this study revealed that about half the Baby Boomer population was financially comfortable and relatively content and satisfied with their lives. The other half did not respond in the same way.

Shire of Swan Public Library Survey Outcomes - Practical Evidence

In April 1999 the Shire of Swan (since 1 April 2000, the City of Swan) Public Library Service undertook a library survey of 881 customers. The City of Swan is the largest local authority area wise in Western Australia extending 1029 km2. The current population is ca 80,000 with a 5.6% growth rate per annum. The area is both rural and urban and supports four public libraries, one joint -use library with a District High School and one para professional library in a new development called Ellenbrook. In the near future is expected that this latter area will accommodate a population of over 30,000 persons.

This survey sought the following information:

- demographic profile;
- satisfaction levels with the library service;
- self service options;
- purpose for using the libraries;
- prioritisation of future needs;
- personal computer/internet availability;
- value to the customer of variety of resources and services;
- passive and active leisure preferences.

The survey was constructed in such a way so as to analyse the Baby Boomers as library users within the same areas as mentioned above. To

achieve this outcome, the age groupings were arranged so that both the 'leading' edge' and the 'trailing' edge' could be identified. The tabled outcomes identify the collective responses of both the Baby Boomer groups. The Baby Boomers represented 31.3% of those 881 customers who were surveyed.

The following outcomes have been compared with the responses of the 54+ age group:

Demographic Profile

- Overall 72% of the Boomers were married with 15.2% separated, widowed, or divorced, 6.5% in de facto relationships and 6.2% single. By comparison with the 54+ group 72 5% were married, 23% separated, widowed or divorced (a much higher rating than the Baby Boomers however this could relate more to the widowed status), 3.7% single and .7% in defacto relationships.
- With regard to employment, more of the Boomers were employed in professional positions (32.5%) than the 54 + group (19%).
- Education levels revealed that 32% of the Boomers had achieved tertiary bachelor/postgraduate degrees and 21% a certificate /diploma from TAFE. By comparison with the 54+ groups 26.5% had achieved higher level degrees and 10.4% a TAFE certificate diploma.
- There were more Boomers born overseas than there were in the 54 + group where the majority of the non- Australian born came from the United Kingdom.
- 36.5% of the Boomers received $20-40,000 pa, 28.6% $40-60,000pa, 14%$60-80,000and 7.1%over $80,000.Of the 54+ group 52.5% received less than$20,000with 29% $20-40,000 and 17% $40-80,000

Self Service Options

- Relating to self service options the most important services for the Boomers in order of priority were to check their own records, place reservations and renew their loans whereas for the 54+ group ability to renew loans, followed by the ability check loan record and then place reservations were the most important of these options.

Purpose for Using the Libraries

- Although both groups identified the three main reasons for using the library as being - recreation/leisure, followed by general interest and formal study the percentages in each category differed significantly.

  Boomers 54+ Recreation 58%, 78% General interest 17.5%, 13.4% Formal study 15%, 2.2%

Prioritisation of Future Services/Needs

- A list of future services was identified for prioritisation purposes. The first five in order of mean rating for the Boomers were:
  - Electronic access to the library from home- (4.03)
  - Ability to email information queries to the library from home (4.61)
  - Internet training for a fee - (4.61)
  - Electronic books - (5.39)
  - Online searching of international databases for a fee - (5.41)
  - For the 54+ group; the first three identified by the Boomers were of equal importance however their other priorities were lecture programs with guest speakers for a fee and a self-service issue

system.

- This demand for a lecture program with guest speakers by the 54+ has been proven through the Shire of Swan's Lifelong Learning Program where 55% of the attendees were in this age group and only 38% were Baby Boomers.

Personal Computer and Internet Access

- With regard to availability at home of a personal computer and internet access at home the outcome for the Boomers was :
  36.3% had a personal computer without Internet access
  36% had a personal computer with Internet access
  27.5% did not have a personal computer at home
  By contrast, of the 54+ 61.3% did not have this facility. In fact only 17% of the 54+ had a computer with Internet access.

  It is interesting to note that the 54+ also listed remote access to the library from home as one of the highest priorities and yet only 17% had the connection to facilitate this remote access. This may be clarified by the following comment. As this priority question relating to remote access to the library was a ranked question, it is not possible to determine whether this group would actually use this service. Hence their response may have been based on the fact this facility was a good idea or that it was a current trend and would be an expectation for the future.

Value to Customer of Services and Resources

- Value of services and resources was prioritised and mean rated by the Boomers as follows:
  - Non-fiction collection(4.32)
  - Reference collection(4.12)
  - Fiction collection (4.09)
  - Reference and information service(3.90)
  - The least important were seniors' services(2.33), multi-language collection(2.23) and children's and youth services(2.88)

  The priorities of the 54+ group were:
  - Fiction collection
  - Non fiction collection
  - Seniors' services
  - Community information

Passive and Active Leisure Interests

- Regarding passive and leisure activities both groups identified the same interests. For passive leisure the results were in order of priority as follows -reading, followed by listening to music, visiting libraries, watching television and gardening. For active leisure interests running and walking rated as the highest followed by swimming, water sports, dancing and aerobics/fitness classes.

Impact of the Baby Boomers on Public Libraries - Myth of Reality?

From this research it is obvious that the Baby Boomers are not a homogenous group. In fact there appears to be two distinct groups with major differences and subgroups within the groups. The Boomer market can indeed be split into various segments. Awareness of this and knowledge of these segments within our respective communities is critical for future

service provision.

Now to the burning question - Will the Baby Boomers as a generation impact on public library services and resources?

Demographics have shown that by the years 2011-2021 the Boomers will join the ranks of the mature market (the term seniors or aged will undoubtedly be heavily debated and denied by this group). This impact will be encountered by all service providers, including public libraries. As this group ages or matures it is inevitable that the impact for public libraries will be on seniors' services and the viability of catering to the needs of this diverse age group which comprises a high proportion of ethnicity.

Based on the 1996 Census the 65+ age group in Western Australia equated to 14% of the population. In 1996 24% of the population were Baby Boomers. Within the years 2011 and 2021 the former group will join the more inactive and frail aged group and the Baby Boomers will enter the 65 + age group. Together these two groups will pose a real challenge to public library service providers as they both compete for very diverse services.

The following statements offer potential scenarios for future library services for the ageing Baby Boomers. The objective of the statements is to awaken awareness and provoke further thoughts for discussion:

- Currently libraries offer a range of services for both active and inactive seniors within the community and resources to meet failing vision such as large print books and audio tapes.
- Publishers will need to rethink the title range of their large print publications to meet the discerning needs of the mature Baby Boomer customers. The E-Book may be one option if the font size can be adjusted and titles are readily available.
- Due to their youthfulness the Boomers are more likely to engage in intergenerational programs instead of traditional seniors' activities. Combined programs with teenagers are quite feasible.
- Lifelong learning programs are of interest to retirees however the content of these programs may differ to suit the demands of the two ageing groups.
- Continuing education could be seen as a right by this assertive and educated group. Demands could be placed on public libraries to be involved in personal and self education development courses and skills to cope with a changing world.
- Technology will be a driving force and a proportion of the Baby Boomers will expect our public libraries to offer the latest and the best.
- Access to the library from home has been identified in the Shire of Swan survey as a number one priority for both the Baby Boomers and the older generation. The Baby Boomers appear to have the technology, which the older generation does not possess. The library will potentially bridge the gap between the information rich and poor.
- Baby Boomers are more likely to be virtual customers whereas the older generation may still prefer the face to face service.
- Home delivery of resources even for the active aged Baby Boomers may be a future expectation as convenience was considered to be of high importance to this generation.
- The future of the Homebound Service is another potential area for change. The older generation incapable of accessing the library will probably still appreciate the personal delivery of library resources. By

contrast those Baby Boomers with access to technology and at the same stage in the lifespan may possibly prefer their resources to be down loaded and read via an electronic reader.

- Diversified and innovative marketing and communication strategies will be crucial for the delivery of future seniors' services as the target audience will consist of two very diverse generations
- Information will be in high demand combined with ease of access to that information. The quality of the service will determine the value of the service to this consumer group.
- Public libraries may need to form stronger alliances with institutions, organisations and commercial outlets which offer similar products, services and resources for joint ventures and to keep in touch with the various marketing strategies.

The success of future public library services to seniors of the two generations will be determined by the diversity, range and availability of options both in resources, programs, services, service delivery methods and marketing techniques. Innovative, visionary leadership, commitment, and enthusiasm will be a requirement of future public librarians to work with this rich reservoir of wisdom and experience spanning two diverse generations.

From the literature (Theoretical Evidence) it is clear that the Baby Boomers are of a different generation with quite contrasting needs and expectations to those of previous generations. The importance of theoretical evidence cannot be underestimated. The particular use or value of theory depends on at least two factors: the validity of the theory and what the theory is used for. Indeed, practitioners often dismiss theory, however research or theoretical foundations are critical to practical success.

For this paper the theory, based on written evidence of extensive statistical, market, social and historical research by well reputed authors and Government agencies provided

- Pertinent information relating to the environment and historical setting in which the Baby Boomers were born
- Characteristics and values of the Boomers based on observation, interviews and surveys
- Identification of their needs as a particular market segment.

Further research is required into this topical subject in particular into the two Baby Boomer groups. However, from the initial findings it is evident that the theory about the Boomers complements the practical evidence and outcomes of the City of Swan survey:

- The Boomer generation is well educated
- The Boomers do have greater expectations in relation to service provision and delivery
- Information and lifelong learning are important to this generation
- Time and convenience is of the essence
- Remote access via technology to which they have access is a high priority.

In this instance both theory and practice have resulted in the same trends and outcomes. Theory in itself cannot stand alone - practical testing is critical to determine the validity of the outcome and results.

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